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Qualities of an Effective Project Manager

10 Things Every A&E Project Manager Should Do

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Effective project management is at the core of great project-based firms. Here are 10 things every project manager should be doing to be highly effective:

1. Take Ownership from the Start

A project manager is accountable for the success or failure of their projects. Taking ownership of the project from the beginning provides a project manager with more control over the outcome of the project. What does taking ownership mean? It means asking for access to the tools and information necessary to properly manage the project. Don't just wait for someone to provide the tools – if there are reports, budget information, or anything else needed to make your projects successful – ask for them.

2. Establish a Baseline for Performance Measurement

At the start of every project, establish a baseline and determine how progress will be monitored. Rely on metrics, don't measure performance based on opinions or a feeling. At any point in time, know if project milestones are being achieved and how the project is tracking against the budget so you can adjust as needed.

Make sure the project scope is clearly defined and establish milestones. Break a project into phases and tasks to help define how time and billing will be captured. Think about a linear structure for accomplishing what needs to be done and define dependencies. When dependencies are addressed in a timely manner project delays can be avoided, staff utilization can improve and the likelihood of meeting milestones goals is increased.

3. Facilitate a Project Kickoff Meeting

Facilitate a project kickoff meeting at the start of the project to share the project vision with the client and the team that will be doing the bulk of the work. It's important to include internal staff because they need to be clear on the project objectives, milestones and their part in the project for it to be successful.

Be sure to discuss the budget, necessary resources and project timeline. Maintain clear visibility into these items, even if it means making software and other tools available to the entire project team. They may need this information to plan their resources and to determine whether there is a need to subcontract work.

Also, discuss the billing process with the client, what an invoice will look like and payment terms so that the process is clear. Lastly - Projects require constant and timely communication. So review the best communication methods to ensure communication channels are clear and open both ways.

4. Utilize Resources Effectively

The project manager is the direct contact for the client and the go-to for internal resources, as well as the liaison for any subcontractors that may be used on the project. As a result, a project manager needs to always be aware of resource needs and team utilization. This role may not be first nature for everyone, because often project managers prefer to draw, design or engineer. However, resource management is a critical component of the PM role and detrimental to project success.

Avoid the risk of elastic hours by sharing the scope of work and your expectations. Have a plan for what the team needs to do, how many hours it should take and what to do if the client starts asking for work outside the original project scope. By sharing the project vision and holding the team accountable it makes project management easier. Over time it also helps shape team culture and makes it easier to achieve positive results.

5. Review Time, Expenses, Consultant Charges Weekly

It's important to review project time on a regular basis in order to follow the plan and efficiently use the billable hours available. If charges do not align with what's in the plan tab, consider whether scope creep or unproductive work in progress have occurred.

Scope creep kills projects. Learning too late about excess work that has been done can sink the budget. When the work has already been done, it can be difficult to go back to the client and justify additional payment.

It's often difficult to get visibility into scope creep when you're blending additional services with normal production charges in your system. Instead, capture additional services separately by breaking them out as a separate phase within the project. When someone charges anything within this phase, require detailed information as to why this work is being done out of scope. That way the situation is addressed and additional payment is negotiated before the work has been completed.

The kickoff meeting is a good time to discuss project scope and how client requests for additional services will be handled. Make sure that the client understands how additional services should be requested and that they will be billed outside the project scope.

6. Engage in Project Status Meetings

Make sure there is a clear line of communication with the people doing the work to ensure that everything in the reports is indicative of what's really happening. The best way to do this is to conduct ongoing project status meetings. These meetings could be weekly or biweekly depending on the duration and complexity of the project. Establish clear objectives and agendas for these meetings and assign action items. Open action items should not be allowed to lag more than one meeting , and make sure people are held accountable.

Give the team visibility into how you're tracking deliverables. Show them how you're monitoring earned value analysis, tracking schedules and more. Also, be like a bulldozer to help remove obstacles that prevent them from meeting deadlines.

In project management, there's a delicate balance between direct involvement and setting the right expectations. The best practice is to find the middle gound. Don't be a micromanager, otherwise your staff won't grow or learn to become self motivated. On the otherhand, don't be completely disengaged. Find that balance between being ontop of it without being ontop of them.

7. Review, Adjust and Report Immediately after Each Project Status Meeting

After the status meetings, implement the discussed changes immediately. Document changes to the schedule, budget, project scope or other details that may have changed. Documentation is your lifeline when problems occur. It will act as a reminder of why decisions were made and can improve communication with management. Learn from your mistakes and adjust your approach. If you don't learn from what you did before you're doomed to make the same mistakes.¬

A common complaint we hear from project managers is that principals often get too involved. Usually what's happening in these situations is that firm management is looking for assurance that key issues are being handled in a timely manner and that information they are hearing is accurate. Keeping your management informed will help to build that trust and assurance so there will be less need for them to micromanage.

8. Proactively Bill Clients

Most firms have a standard billing cycle. Regardless of whether invoices are sent at month's end, the last Friday of the month, or mid month, the ability to proactively bill a client is crucial. For example, this might be after a milestone or after you've completed a site visit with the client. They're happy, they just got some direct attention, so if they're invoiced now, they're more

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likely to pay on time. The longer the wait the harder it is to be reimbursed.

Collection activities also require attention. Even if making the calls is not a project management responsibility, consider monitoring accounts receivable. A project manager's familiarity with the the project and the client will typically offer a better idea of why a client may be delaying payment. As a best practice, about a week after an invoice is sent,have the project manager give the client a call to make sure they received it and to see if they have any questions. This is guaranteed to improve accounts recievable.

9. Get Feedback from Clients

Effective project managers constantly ask for feedback from the client during the project. The best time to ask for feedback is after they've been invoiced. This is the time the client will be most compelled to share their thoughts.

Waiting to ask for feedback after the project is complete is not a good practice. From the client's point of view – it's too late as there is no opportunity to change the overall result. It's okay to send a survey, but make sure feedback is collected consistently while the project is underway to help correct issues immediately - before it's too late.

10. Facilitate Project Closeout Meetings

After a project is complete the project manager should facilitate a project close out meeting to discuss lessons learned, what worked as well, what could have been done better, and what to avoid in the future.

Review initial baseline estimates against the final results. Were the targets hit and if not, why not? What can be learned from this to improvemanagement of similar projects in the future? This information should be captured and tied back to project profiles so that it can be used for future project proposals.

Achieving project management excellence requires constant effort. Over time, however, it becomes easier as a project manager's skills increase. The benefits of becoming an effective project manager are great and include higher client satisfaction, reduced staff turnover, higher profits and better communication.